

QUINCY PATRIOT LEDGER (MA)
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Editorials

News leaks and 'plumbers'

CIA Director William Casey has been bashing the media in a campaign that brings to mind former Vice President Spiro Agnew, who also relished taking shots at the press and TV. Nostalgia for the Nixon Administration days has struck the FBI as well; the bureau has just set up a "plumbers unit" to plug news leaks that so disturb Casey.

A few weeks ago, the CIA director threatened to prosecute some newspapers and magazines if they printed details about Ronald W. Pelton, the National Security Agency employee accused of spying for the Soviets. Those details and more — highly embarrassing to the national security establishment — are now pouring out from government witnesses in Pelton's trial.

The Soviets know what they know about Pelton. Casey has been trying to keep non-secrets secret from the American public. Some people in government are like that, and quick to charge those who reveal "unauthorized" information with being disloyal or worse.

The White House received a recommendation recently that an FBI "plumbers unit" be formed to go after the leaks and fix them. White House aides did not approve; they remem-

bered the illegal tactics used by Nixon's plumbers and the rest of that unfortunate story.

Yet despite the lack of White House approval, the FBI set up its plumbers unit anyhow — five to eight agents were assigned to it two weeks ago. "It is ready to do business," an FBI source told John Bennett of Scripps Howard News Service. Casey's tone may have been enough to send what the FBI took as a message.

Whether the plumbers actually will do business and what kind of business it will be is up to a top-level White House panel. It includes CIA Director Casey and Lt. Gen. William Odom, head of the National Security Agency.

"I'm alarmed by the implication of the FBI team," says Michael Gartner, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. "And I'm alarmed about the general atmosphere in this government toward the role of the press. It's scary as hell."

Nixon's plumbers helped teach the nation a lesson about what happens when an administration becomes intoxicated with its own power. With that lesson far too fresh to need repeating, President Reagan should order the FBI plumbers to turn in their wrenches. And he should instruct Casey to tone down his rhetoric.